

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

IRAN: A PATH TO GREATER STABILITY

Statesmanship is the art of seeing through the
gales and dust of fear, pride and prejudice to
perform that which renders justice to a nation's
past, secures its present and lends promise to
its future.

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Situated at the crossroads of the Middle East and Central Asia, Iran is strategic terrain. Oil, Islam, terrorism and nuclear proliferation only underscore Iran's importance in the international calculus. Unfortunately, the bilateral relationship has not moved beyond the shadows cast by the 1979 revolution¹. Our focus has been to press Teheran to eschew terrorism and its designs on nuclear weapons. Fearing verbal pressure augurs a more muscular interaction, Teheran has behaved schizophrenically regarding its nuclear program, terrorism and Iraq. Posturing on both sides has increased tensions without yielding positive results. Progress lies in a three-tiered strategy maintaining tough lines on terrorism and proliferation yet offering dialogue on regional issues while working with allies and local civic groups to promote reform in Iran.

WHAT IS AT STAKE: THE AMERICAN INTERESTS

Vital security and economic interests are tied to the region's vast oil reserves. Our approach in Iran will impact the overall legitimacy and effectiveness of our global anti-terrorism and nuclear proliferation policies. Stabilization in Iraq and Afghanistan, other vital interests, can be helped or hindered by Iran. Our treatment of Iran also will influence the Islamic world's view of the "American World Order." The new approach will help project the ideals of human rights, peaceful change and tolerance in the region.

RECASTING THE AMERICAN OBJECTIVE IN IRAN

Heretofore, our objectives have been couched in the negative: cease nuclear weapons acquisition and sever links to terrorism. Yet, basing the relationship around this couplet of prohibitions engenders antagonism and obscures our genuine goal: not to handcuff a "bad" Iran, but to redirect it toward regional stability. Such a formulation will expand the relationship by incorporating issues amenable to cooperative strategies. Common ground on these issues can mitigate the centrifugal impact of differences on terrorism and the nuclear program.

THE GLOBAL SETTING

The Middle East is fibrillating with simultaneous crises. Crisis in Iran could invite greater regional fragility. Caution is thus needed because our actions will have systemic ramifications. American action will be gauged by all other nations. This affects their relationships with us and others. Because we have authored a new global order, nations read our actions to determine the parameters of that system.² The world sympathized with us in Afghanistan but opposed the Iraqi invasion. Most nations think America too heavily inclines toward military power. They fear our Iran policy has been shaped to go the route of forced regime change. Use of force would generate a global vehemence carrying heavy political costs.

Western allies have been in "dialogue" with Iran. Use of force would repudiate these efforts, exacerbating the distance between them and us. Russian interests also must be weighed. Marginalized in Europe, Russia seeks influence in Central Asia; Iran is part of that calculation. Iran also factors in the nuclear-influenced balance of power dynamics of southern Asia. Both Pakistan and India have flirted with Iran. Albeit, this Asian dynamic is inchoate and Iran is not a primary player. Yet, the game's very existence shows that our Iranian policy will impact many nations' security calculations.

Iran and Israel remain at odds. Teheran still disavows the two-state solution in Palestine, a reactionary vestige of Israeli support for the Shah.³ Iran's aid to terrorists and its unclear nuclear intentions place the two nations at loggerheads; this could degenerate into a collision course should either miscalculate the other's intentions or tolerance.

THE VIEW FROM IRAN

The 1979 revolution was built on anti-Americanism, Shiite beliefs and Iranian nationalism.⁴ Animus toward Washington has been a glue keeping the clerics in power. With American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran fears a closing vise. Its nightmare is military action staged from these countries.

For nearly a century, Iranian nationalism has perceived itself as a struggle against dictators controlled by the

dominant global power of the day, first Britain, then America. This distrust of America is but one aspect of Iranian nationalism. "Far from the monolithic, totalitarian police state described by some commentators, Iran's politics reflect an intensely complex, highly plural, dynamic characteristic of a state in transition that incorporates the contradictions and instabilities inherent in such a process.⁵" In many ways, the Islamic revolution has become moribund, incapable of addressing fundamental political and economic concerns of most Iranians. Moderates and progressives are challenging the theocracy through a synthesis of western and Iranian ideas.⁶ These reformers look to the west for intellectual inspiration. In short, they love America's domestic politics but hate its foreign policy.

THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

The 2003 National Security Strategy puts Iran on the wrong side of the aisle regarding terrorism and WMD, the Bush Administration's major national security pillars. American public opinion still perceives Iran as a league of fundamentalists bent on regional leadership. However, Americans differ on how to deal with Iran. Many favor the present coercive policy. Others believe we have been stretched thin by Iraq and Afghanistan and have consumed much of our international goodwill mounting these efforts. They see the region as kindling where a spark could ignite instability throughout. They favor dialogue

with Iran. These viewpoints will compete for ascendance in the foreign policy skirmishes of the 2004 elections.

CONTOURS OF A NEW POLICY

American policy should blend clear signals on terrorism and nuclear weapons with offers of cooperation on Iraq and other issues. Integral to this strategy would be an assurance abjuring regime change provided Iran rejects terrorism and accepts Israel's existence. An assurance on regime change may bolster the current leadership in the short run. Over the longer haul, it strengthens reformers. Painting themselves as guardians against American encroachment has been part of the clerics' staying power. They have doused reform by labeling it an American contrivance. By disavowing regime change, we rob the clerics of this justification. Also comforted by this assurance, allies will be more supportive of the policy's tough stances on terror and nuclear weapons. This signal on regime change need not be a unilateral gift. A reciprocal acceptance of a two-state solution in Palestine would be an adequate quid pro quo.

The most nettlesome aspect of the bilateral relationship, differences over Iran's nuclear program can wreak havoc if not carefully managed. Western allies recently employed diplomacy to extract Iranian compliance with IAEA inspections. We should publicly commend Iran on the agreement; in concert with these allies, we must continue to privately press Iran to honor the

new agreement and all IAEA requirements. We must clearly state an Iran that supports terrorism will not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons and that we are willing to use force to stop it. The threat of Security Council sanctions should also remain. The resultant "outlaw" status would blot Iran's self-image; Iran also would fear sanctions as a prelude to American military action. Yet, we should not oppose civilian nuclear pursuits.⁷ As a corollary, Iran and Israel should be advised that we oppose any attacks against Iranian facilities provided they remain wholly civilian.⁸ Russia, Pakistan and China must be urged to control technology transfers.

This strategy on Iran's nuclear program is imperfect; its value is its dilatoriness. Iran views nuclear weapons as a symbol of prestige and a cornerstone of its long-term national defense. Notwithstanding the recent European-sponsored agreement, Iran will continue to hem, hedge and haw about its nuclear intentions. Meanwhile, permanent denial of nuclear weapons is unlikely. History argues against such a perpetual sequestration, particularly where a nation has the political will and material assets to develop the desired weaponry. Instead of a futile attempt to keep an adversarial Iran nuclear-free, the more pragmatic tack is to make Iran less of an enemy by the time it acquires the weapons.

Thus, the underlying aim is not to deny but to delay weapons acquisition. Given the reformist dynamic in Iran, the longer weapons acquisition takes, the more the government will be influenced by reform. While many reformers want nuclear weapons, they tend to be more pragmatic: they will restrain the government's behavior and its support for terrorism because they view this as in Iran's national interest.

Iran must end support for terrorism. Conversely, we should not oppose legitimate economic and political support for the Shiite enclave in Lebanon, but funding Hizbollah or any other terrorism must cease. Teheran must also come clean on Al Qaeda's presence in Iran. If not, we will work with allies to develop a graduated response, ranging from sanctions, withdrawal of our offers to cooperate on Iraq/Afghanistan, to the possible retraction of our promise on regime change, depending on the extent of Iran's support in terrorism. For reasons of both geopolitics and Shiite affinity, Iran would like to be involved in Iraq and, to a lesser degree, Afghanistan. A strategy of measured engagement would allow Iran to help address legitimate socio-economic needs of both countries' Shiite populations. This would enable Iran to act as the champion of Shiites; in return it would have to agree to work within the confines of the political systems being established in those nations. While

difficult, the overture is worthwhile to minimize Iranian concerns about encirclement.

Liberal reform advances our interests by reducing the power and extremism of the central government in the domestic and foreign arenas.⁹ We should encourage reform but must avoid tainting the movement with an American brush. Working with allies to support credible Islamic and indigenous civic groups is prudent. Our allies should assume the prominent sponsorship; European assistance will be viewed with less jaundice.

OPPORTUNITIES, ABILITIES (POWER), AND RISKS

The new strategy holds both promise and imperfection. By seeking dialogue on Iraq and other issues, it promotes stability throughout the region while distancing Iran from terrorism and peacefully channeling its nuclear program. These processes materially enhance U.S. security. This strategy is also likely to gain more support from allies and moderate Islamic states. While neither wholly satisfactory to the political right nor left, the strategy has elements around which an American consensus can develop, thus minimizing the partisan carping and mixed signals that often afflict an election year.

We have the military, economic and diplomatic power tools to implement this policy. But, U.S. influence with Iran's government is negative; with the reformers, it is ambivalent.

Influence with allies is significant. Our influence with all sides will grow the more we appear amenable to dialogue.

The policy has its potential flaws. An unrepentant Iran could move to acquire nuclear weapons and continue supporting terrorism if it misreads our policy's boundaries. This would present a Hobson's choice between acquiescence and forcible challenge. Acquiesce would signal weakness. Force would invite opprobrium, undermining our role as architect of an international system based on the rule of law and peaceful change. Such heightened insecurity threatens oil supplies. The policy could make Iraq susceptible to Iran's political meddling. Yet, these risks equally afflict the current policy.

CONCLUSION

Sound bites like the "Great Satan" and "Axis of Evil" have flair but cause strategic blindness. Conversely, the new approach seeks to persuade Iran toward responsible behavior through a mixture of carrots and sticks. The policy's tough lines represent continuity, ensuring adversaries do not perceive a sudden U.S. weakening on terrorism or proliferation. Prospects for dialogue show our friends that we value restraint and their viewpoints. Offering an alternative to confrontation, promoting consensus within the United States and garnering allied support, the new approach may improve the region's stability by encouraging reform in perhaps its most strategic state.

¹ Mahmood Sarioalghalam, "Understanding Iran: Getting Past Stereotypes and Mythology," The Washington Quarterly 26, No. 4 (2003): 70

² Robert Axelrod and Michael D. Cohen, Harnessing Complexity (New York: The Free Press, 1999), II, The systemic ramification described above will even be more pronounced because Iran is a major state in its own right.

³ Sarioalghalam, 71

⁴ Ali M. Ansari, "Continuous Regime Change from Within," The Washington Quarterly 26, No. 4 (2003): 58

⁵ Ansari, 53. Here, Washington must banish from its calculations the idea of an Iranian-led regional Islamic revolution. Competitive national leadership rivalries, ethnic differences and the Sunni/Shiite divide render this scenario highly unlikely.

⁶ Ansari, 53

⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft and Richard Murphy, "Differentiated Containment," Foreign Affairs 76, No. 3 (1997): 28

⁸ Seeing Iran's nuclear capacity as an existential threat, Israel may feel obligated to attack if given a measurable suspicion of Iran closing in on the possession of clear weapons. In this instance, Israeli leaf should not determine the sway of the American tree. Israel must be counseled to act with restraint.

⁹ Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," in Gideon Rose, ed., America And The World, New York:W.W. Norton, 2002, p. 138.

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